

# SUBLIMINAL AUTOMATION

by Francis Preve

As one of Brian Eno's *Oblique Strategies* cards states, "Repetition is a form of change." For dance music, this isn't merely a strategy, but a mantra. However, the fact of the matter is – unless your audience's intoxicants are extremely good – too much repetition gets old *fast*. Too little, and you risk breaking the spell you're casting on the dance floor.

The most common technique for keeping

a riff interesting is to dramatically morph the synths and effects, creating crescendos and peaks to enhance the listener's journey. This is well-suited to progressive dance, some types of house, and of course, trance. But drastic or sweeping changes don't always mesh with the tech and minimal genres.

By applying what I call "subliminal automation," you can hold listeners' attention

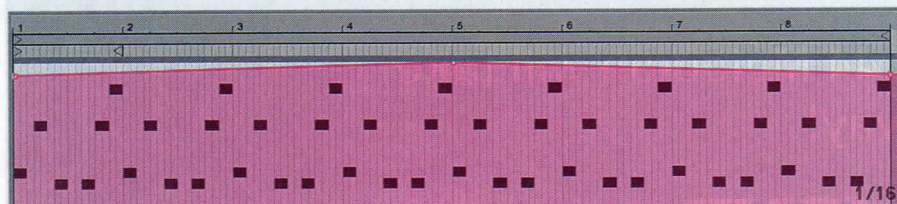
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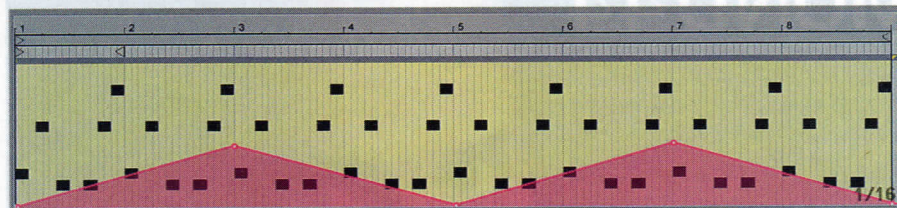
without resorting to abrupt shifts. The idea is to use very small brush strokes to keep a part changing continuously but subtly. To illustrate this, we'll automate an analog-style square wave riff over a beat from Loopmasters' *Joey Youngman* library. The end result is a cycling riff that keeps tickling the ear, while leaving sonic space for embellishments in the drums and other synth bits. ☒



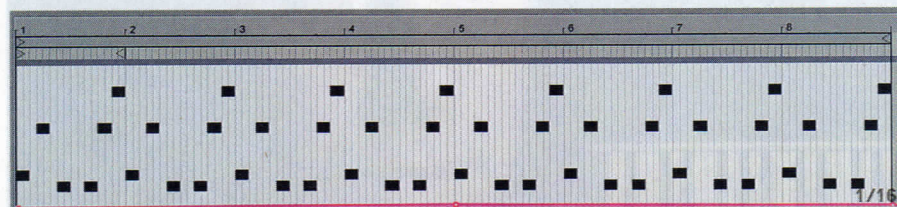
**Step 1.** Create a simple riff with a sound that's not too complex and has a bit of room to morph subtly. Here's the isolated square wave riff, created with FXpansion's Strobe synth from DCAM Synth Squad (reviewed Nov. '09).



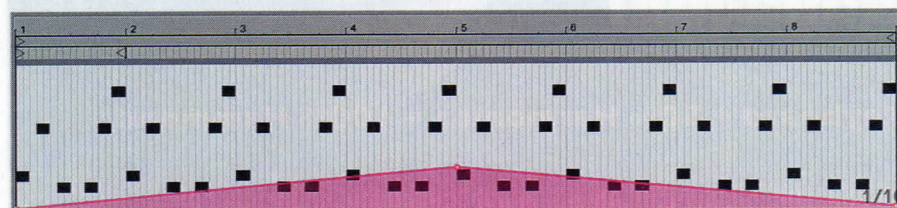
**Step 2.** Let's start with a touch of filter automation. In this example (using Ableton Live), we've lowered the cutoff ever so slightly, then put a slight peak at the middle of the eight-bar loop.



**Step 3.** To change the wave shape slightly, we'll blend in a bit of sawtooth twice, with peaks at bar 3 and bar 7.



**Step 4.** Another useful parameter to automate is the envelope sustain level. Large shifts are great for building peaks and crescendos. A tiny amount adds just a dash of flavor.



**Step 5.** As a final touch, we'll blend in a bit of noise. As with sustain and filter, a little goes a long way. For the peaks, you can get a lot crazier, as we've discussed in previous columns.